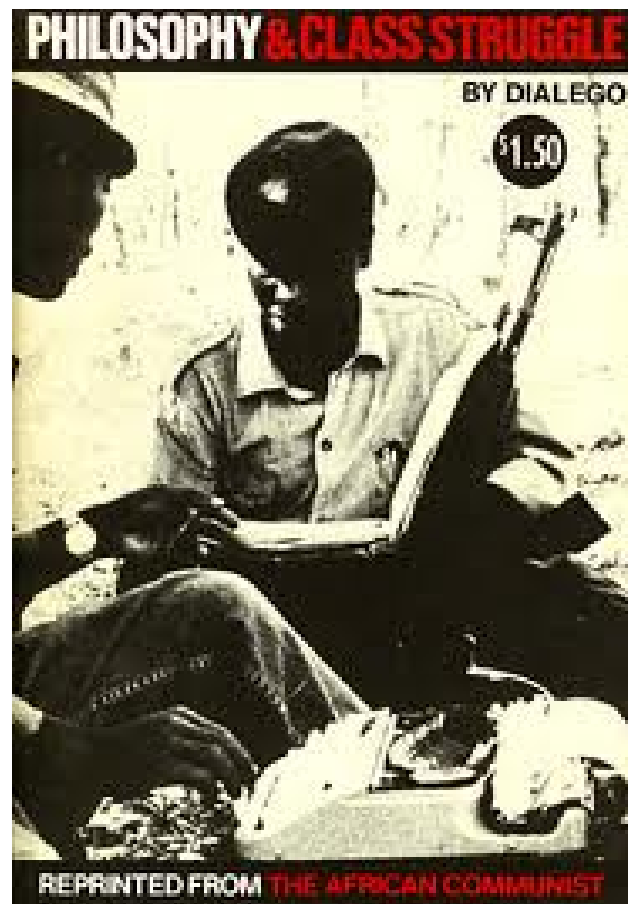


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Philosophy and Class Struggle

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Chapter 1

Why Revolutionaries Need Marxism

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Revolutionaries regard themselves first and foremost as practical people dedicated to changing the world. They are rightly suspicious of those who merely talk about the injustices of apartheid and the evils of capitalism and never seem to translate their words into action. "By their deeds ye shall know them" is an old saying which admirably echoes the emphasis which Marxists themselves place upon the importance of putting things into *practice*: of constantly testing everything we say and do according to the standards of real life itself. *Why then should we bother ourselves with the study of philosophy?*

Philosophy raises questions about the nature of the world, the concept of truth, the basis of morality, and above all, the relationship which exists between our ideas and objective reality: how can all this possibly help us in waging class struggle? After all, it was Marx himself who declared that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it"¹, and there are those who claim that this supports the argument that since revolutionaries are concerned with *changing* the world, they can and should do away with philosophy altogether.

To show why philosophy is important and why we need to make a thorough study of Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism, in particular, we must first tackle the question of

(i) Revolution and the Need for Theory

Those who imagine that all revolutionaries need to do is *act*, forget that action on its own is not enough. (Strictly speaking, it is not even possible). No matter how passionately we hate oppression and wish to see things change, there is only one force capable of eliminating colonialism, capitalism and reaction, and that is the

oppressed and exploited masses led by an *organisation* of revolutionaries. The organisation of a popular movement, the organisation of a disciplined communist party around a political programme able to unite and coordinate various forms of struggle and direct them towards a common goal, is essential.

Yet once we talk about a movement, a Party and a programme we are not simply talking about action, we are talking about action which has been *thought out*, for the only way in which anyone can plan activity and produce a programme is through revolutionary thinking - the development of revolutionary theory which, if it is properly worked out, does not hold back our practical activity but rather serves as a compass which enables us to move in the direction we want to go. This is why Lenin correctly argued in his classic work, *What Is To Be Done* that

the role of vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory²

for the more difficult and dangerous the tasks facing revolutionaries, the more developed and carefully worked out their theoretical perspectives need to be. Take a way of illustrating this point, the South African Communist Party's programme, *The Road to South African Freedom*. While the iniquities of the whole apartheid system may be pretty obvious, the strategy and tactics needed to eliminate them, are not. The programme analyses the particular struggle in South Africa in the whole context of the African revolution; the special character of the colonial-type oppression from which the African, Coloured and Indian people in South Africa suffer; the role of the national democratic revolution as the vital first *step* along the road to socialism, and the importance of carrying through immediate proposals if a democratic South Africa is to be developed and consolidated. This programme is not simply the product of years of revolutionary experience in southern African conditions: it is the product of years of experience *translated into revolutionary theory* so that the people can be shown that the ideal of a democratic and liberated South Africa is not simply a beautiful dream but is a realistic and attainable objective which can be worked and planned for, step by step.

But if we require revolutionary theory so that, in Lenin's words, we can substitute "science for dreams,"³ why do we need a special philosophical outlook as well? Why do we need to base our theory upon the principles of *dialectical materialism* which is the only logical and consistent philosophy a communist can possibly hold?

To answer this question, it is important that we understand

(ii) Philosophy as the Basis of All Our Thinking

The construction of a theory is like the construction of a house; if it is to stay up, then not only must the walls be sound, but also the foundations, and it is to the realm of philosophy we must turn if we want to make sure that our theory has strong foundations. For the truth is that *all* theory, even if it has only been worked out in relation to one particular problem, is rooted in philosophy, some overall view of the world, and even if we are unaware of the existence of this underlying "world outlook," it is there nevertheless, serving as the basis, the very foundation upon which all thought and activity rest.

But why should this matter?

It matters because in the last analysis, policies and action which are based upon a false or inadequate philosophy can only lead us into defeat and despair, for even if we hit upon a particular policy which is correct in itself - for example, the need under South African conditions to conduct armed struggle - unless the philosophical basis of our policy is *also* correct, we will make serious mistakes in carrying it through.

To explain. Dialectical materialism as the philosophical outlook of the Communist Party, enables us, as *The Road to South African Freedom* puts it,

*to understand the world as it really is - and how to change it.*⁴

And there are in fact two inter-related elements involved here:

firstly the need to understand the world as it really is - which is, broadly speaking, a *materialist* approach, *an* approach which treats the world as a material force in its own right that exists independently of what we may think it or like it to be; and

secondly the need to understand this material world, either in nature or society, *as a* world of interconnected change and development, a world of universal conflict and contradiction between what is old and dying and what is new and struggling to be born - an approach we call *dialectical*.⁵

Fused together into a single philosophy, dialectics and materialism enable us to increasingly change the world once we have understood the laws of motion which are at work in its development. *Dialectics* alerts us to the need for change, *materialism* to the importance of bringing this change into line with the objective circumstances which actually prevail.

Supposing, for example, we misapply dialectical materialism by stressing dialectics at the expense of materialism, what is likely to happen? We will come to imagine, as ultra-leftists typically do, that our mere desire or "will" to change things is much more important than the actual conditions which have to be changed. The result? A tendency to pay insufficient attention to the precise character of the situation in which we find ourselves, the kind of popular support which exists at a particular time for a particular action, the real balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy, etc.

This kind of mistake, though based in philosophy, may have and on occasion has had, practical consequences of the most damaging kind.

For example, on October 1, 1965, some leaders of the Indonesian Communist Party took part in a suicidal coup intended to oust reactionaries in the armed forces. Ignoring the real political conditions in the country and isolated from the broad masses both within and outside the party, the result was an unmitigated disaster. The right-wing were able to seize the initiative and unleash one of the worst waves of counter-revolutionary terror ever seen. Literally hundreds of thousands of communists and democrats lost their lives.

Our own movement in South Africa, initiating and guiding the transition to armed struggle in the early 1960's, failed to sufficiently fore-see and prepare for the enemy's viciously brutal response to the new methods of struggle, and our ranks suffered many a grievous loss at that time. The strategy and tactics were correct, and certainly not adventuristic, but in their execution, enthusiasm for action was not matched by accurate anticipation of the likely consequences.

But what of the opposite side of the problem, the tendency to stress the materialist element of our philosophy at the expense of the dialectical? This error arises out of a tendency to be confused over the question of

(iii) Philosophy and Our "Experience"

Materialism as a popular and democratic philosophy existed long before Marx and Engels developed it into a dialectical outlook. In its stress upon an independent and material world which ideas reflect, materialism accords with what is often called our "experience" or common sense - indeed, so much so, that some argue that "with all their years of political experience," they don't need to worry about the principles of dialectical materialism as a guide to their struggles.

Yet while this experience is always valuable and certainly preferable to the fanciful notions which pseudo-revolutionaries may carry around in their heads, on its own it is by no means enough to ensure that our activities meet with success. Experience and common sense may discourage revolutionaries from undertaking actions which are rash or ill-considered, but they may also prevent us from undertaking any revolutionary action at all!

For example, when in 1950 leading members of the Communist Party of South Africa decided in the face of the impending Suppression of Communism Act, that they had no alternative but to simply dissolve the party, some communists, both among the leadership and the rank and file, actually wrote off the possibility of forming a new party underground because of the dangers and difficulties this involved.

The point here is that if we stress the materialist component of our philosophy at the expense of the dialectical, the result will not be ultra-leftism but its twin opposite - right-wing opportunism: the tendency to overestimate the strength of the enemy so that the superficial appearances of the moment are mistaken for the deeper trends at work in historical reality. Indeed, legalistic illusions which stem from an insufficiently *dialectical* approach to politics, may even lead to the kind of unprincipled compromises which make short term gains, but weaken the movement as a whole. The willingness of Buthulezi and other former supporters of the liberation struggle to work within the Bantustan system is a different sort of example of this, for although it seems a "realistic" policy, it in fact involves underestimating the forces building up beneath the "surface" of South African society which will sweep the whole, rotten, fraudulent Bantustan scheme away. These forces beneath the surface can only be understood if we think both materialistically and dialectically so that we see the world in a process of constant change.

Of course, simply studying the theory of dialectical materialism will not in itself ensure that serious mistakes are not made, for the essence of Marxist philosophy is that it has to be *practically* applied. Errors of an ultra-leftist or right-opportunist kind arise not merely out of a failure to learn about dialectical materialism - they also arise out of the failure to get to grips with the question which must now be considered, that of

(iv) Philosophy and the Concrete Study of Concrete Conditions⁶

What has been said so far about the importance of philosophy as a weapon in the class struggle should not be taken to mean (as the Maoists seem to think) that everything can be found in a little Red Book which instantly opens all doors with its simple answers.

Marxist philosophy must be understood as a *guide to action* and not as some kind of self-contained system of ideas which can be used as a substitute for the actual task of carefully studying the real world. The general principles of dialectical materialism act as a framework to assist us in our search for the laws of development at work in a particular situation so that we become more sharply in tune with the precise features of objective reality and understand how they fluidly interrelate as a process of change. The stress placed upon the importance of the national liberation struggle as the *particular* form of the class struggle to be waged under present South African conditions is a good example of the creative application of Marxist philosophy to a specific situation. One of the great achievements of Communists like Moses Kotane was that he immediately grasped (as Dr. Yusuf Dadoo puts it)

the need to indigenise Marxism so as to give it meaning for the millions of our workers and peasants.⁷

for it is the specific feature of the South African situation that there can be "no working class victory without black liberation and no black liberation without the destruction of capitalism in all its forms."⁸ The general principles of Marxism-Leninism have to be concretely *applied* and it is simply not good enough to speak in the abstract about the contradiction between worker and capitalist as though this is all the class struggle involved!

Lenin put the question well when he said that

it is not enough to be a revolutionary and an adherent of socialism or a Communist in general. You must be able at each particular moment to find the particular link in the chain which you must grasp with all your might in order to hold the whole chain and to prepare firmly for the transition to the next link...⁹

For this is the essence of the dialectical materialist approach: to discover both the *particular* links in the revolutionary chain and to work out how these links fit together *as a whole*, so that the constituent elements in the struggle - "the African revolution," "the national democratic revolution" and "the struggle for socialism" - are properly integrated into a coherent and overall revolutionary strategy.

Under no circumstances can dialectical materialism serve, as Engels once put it, "as an excuse for not studying history"¹⁰ or as a pretext for skating over the complexities of a particular situation. Indeed, why this is so will become clearer once we understand the character of

(v) Dialectical Materialism as a Philosophy of a New Type

Marxism is the first philosophy in history to thoroughly grasp the inevitability of change and the dynamic and historical character of nature and society. For the Marxist, in the words of Engels, "nothing is stable except instability, nothing is immovable except movement"¹¹: in fact, the only thing which cannot alter in the universe is change itself! No wonder the white supremacists in southern Africa fear Marxism like the plague itself, for like all ruling classes, they wish to believe that their privileged way of life will last forever!

This stress upon movement and contradiction as the basic force in the universe makes dialectical materialism unique as a philosophy and sets it apart from the various philosophies, popular and ruling class, which preceded it;

To elaborate this point, it will help to distinguish

- (a) philosophy as it has existed from time immemorial, as a way of looking at the world and understanding it in general terms; and
- (b) philosophy as it has been conceived of by ruling class philosophers who have sought to work out their theoretical principles in a purely abstract way in a world which seems remote from the experience of the people and their social activities.

Philosophy in the *first* sense is part of everyday thought and speech and (as we have already seen) all our ideas have a basis in philosophy whether we are aware of this fact or not. Indeed, this kind of philosophy existed long before people calling themselves "philosophers" arrived on the scene, and in its earliest forms, for example in primitive communist society, such philosophy had a quality and a richness which was lost in those countries where people began to philosophise in an abstract and over-specialised way. when A. Lerumo comments that

the forms of primitive communism existing in Africa before European conquest embodied cultures, values and traditions in many ways far superior to those of the representatives of capitalism who invaded and destroyed them . . .¹²

This point also applies to the vivid and lively tradition in early philosophy where ideas about truth and morality, nature and the universe were expressed through song and dance, story-telling and drama and in the democratic popular assemblies - a part of the living fabric of social practice itself.

Of course this kind of philosophy suffered from the fact that it was limited and parochial (as common sense often is today) and naturally reflected the narrow basis of tribal society, but at least it had the virtue of being in touch with popular feeling and social needs.

How did philosophy acquire its reputation as a body of thought remote from the world of reality?

The historical division of society into antagonistic classes brought the development of the division of labour to the point where manual and mental activities became sharply segregated from one another. Only the slave worked with his hands, only the gentleman exercised his mind! The philosophical product of this social division was the development of *idealism*: the theoretical outlook which places the spiritual world above the world of matter and looks upon reality as the immutable work of an Ideal Creator, an attitude which has always formed the dominant current in ruling class thought.

Although this kind of idealism seems to be so remote from reality that it is simply irrelevant to political struggle, in fact its very "remoteness" and abstraction serves the ruling class as an important ideological weapon

- (a) in its efforts to perpetuate the division of labour between workers and those who are supposed to think for them - hence the notion that "ideas create reality"; and
- (b) as the philosophical basis to its propagandist assertions that exploitation and class divisions are part of a divine and timeless order which nothing can change.

When Dr. Malan replied to a demand for democracy and an end to apartheid presented by the ANC in 1952, by saying that the differences between white and black "are permanent and not man made"¹³, he unconsciously revealed the *practical* role which idealism plays in defending racism and exploitation by placing them above the forces of historical change. In other words, his argument demonstrates how important it is that we not only embrace a philosophy of the new type, but continue to struggle against philosophy of the old, ruling class type, for the origins of this philosophy in the division of labour and its role in perpetuating class barriers and all forms of prejudice reveal that even the most

metaphysical philosophy helps reactionaries in the class struggle. That is why we must fight it!

Of course it is true that viewed historically, idealist philosophy has played a part in developing human reason and thought, but its significance must not be exaggerated, for dialectical materialism not merely incorporates into its outlook the best of ruling class philosophy (for example, Hegel's brilliant theory of dialectics), but it also draws upon the popular and democratic tradition of philosophy as it has existed from earliest times - that form of philosophy which is intrinsic to all our thought and action and which is part and parcel of everyday life.

Dialectical materialism, that is to say, creatively combines *both* forms of philosophy we have referred to in a synthesis and that provides a philosophy of a new type. While it tackles the basic questions which the ruling class philosophers were the first to present in a universal way - the nature of our ideas and their relation to reality - it does so, not in some abstract or speculative manner, but only in the light of our knowledge of history, our experience of the class struggle and the latest developments in the world of science.

Dialectical materialism is the only philosophical outlook which enables us to approach the world dynamically, concretely and in a way which helps us link up particular problems with the struggle to liberate society and mankind as a whole.

It is therefore the natural and logical philosophy for all revolutionaries who have completely dedicated themselves to this struggle and have nothing to fear from change.

Notes

1. *Theses on Feuerbach*, No. XI, as an appendix to *The German Ideology*, (Moscow/London, 1964), p.647
2. *Collected Works* 5, (London/Moscow, 1961), p.370.
3. *Fredrick Engek*, *Collected Works* 2, (Moscow/London, 1960), p.20.
4. *The Road to South African Freedom*, p.8.
5. The term *dialectics* was originally used by the ancient Greek philosophers to denote a method of debate and discussion in which the truth was reached when one thinker disclosed the contradictions and divisions in the argument of another. In this way, a position was turned upside down and forced to change!

6. In an article in the journal *Communism*, Lenin speaks of "the very gist, the living soul of Marxism" as "a concrete analysis of a concrete situation₁" *Collected Works* 31, (Moscow/London, 1966), p. 166.
 7. Introduction to B. Bunting, Moses Kotane, South African Revolutionary, (Inkululeko Publication&, 1975), p.1.
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Government*, *Collected Works* 27, (Moscow/London, 1965), p. 273.
 10. *Engels to Schmidt*, 5/9/1890, *Selected Correspondence*, (Moscow, 1953), p.496.
 11. Engels made this comment in the article on Turkey in 1853, cited by M. Loewy, *Marxists and the National Question*, *New Left Review* 96, pp.84-85.
 12. *Fifty Fighting Years* (Inkululeko Publications, 1971), p.3.
 13. Moses Kotane, *op. cit.*, p.183.
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